

BOXES OF BOOKS NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

By Renee Langmuir

The three boxes were waiting silently in the back of the classroom near the sink, an early morning delivery by the school janitor. Two small rectangular boxes had the familiar imprint of the famous children's book publisher known to every elementary school in the country. The third large box was bulky, but light, housing an eye catching, red cardboard bookshelf, already assembled with the title "Ready to Go Library."

The journey of these books into my life was a long one. I had been a reading specialist since 1976 – the lucky purveyor of phonetic tricks that had helped hundreds of young children catch on to the mysterious code of the English language. What a way to earn a living – passing on "secrets of the trade" to teachers, and analyzing why children were having difficulty learning to read and write to come up with a game plan for improvement. I had deep, satisfying interactions with interested families and worked with well meaning school officials at a local, community and state level. For most of my career, there was a sense that literacy education techniques were on an upward climb, integrating new information from the neuroscience community about how the brain works, and the dissemination of ideas through professional organizations, outstanding publishing companies, teacher training, and new technology.

I didn't notice the tide turning for quite a while. At first when NCLB was initiated, my school district got a wonderful grant from our state to provide after school tutoring for kindergarteners and first graders having difficulty learning to read. A professor from a local university was hired to strategize the program, and money was available for busing because our students had parents who were still working at 3:45. There was even money for after school snacks! Tutors were trained, books were purchased, and the program ran for a few years with great success. It was even entitled "Read to Succeed!" Gradually, the money was eliminated from the state budget. That was the last time I saw *any* money earmarked for *improvement* of literacy from either the state or federal government.

In the next few years, all attention turned to test scores and test preparation. It is estimated that testing is now a \$2.3 billion a year enterprise, with just five big companies controlling 90% of the statewide testing revenue. The prevailing climate in the country and in my local district necessitated a career move I would never have predicted – a return to the classroom.

I found myself back in a fourth grade classroom last year. The work was incredibly satisfying, although the elementary classroom is a laboratory for just about every educational and social initiative: inclusive learning, hands-on science, differentiated instruction, writer's workshop, deeply conceptual math, etc. Trying to manage all of the content and being sensitive to the real needs of kids living in the 21st century is exhausting, even for an old pro like me.

Those boxes of books at the back of the classroom – how did they get there? They came to me after a year long period of protest about the dismal state of literacy education. My first year back in the classroom, I withdrew from all of the professional organizations I joined right after college. What was wrong with the leadership of these organizations? How could they allow the *punitive* climate of literacy testing which took all the joy and humanity out of instruction? They obviously weren't doing enough! By the second year in the classroom, a colleague talked me into going to a Saturday morning workshop entitled, "Motivating Readers." I was beginning to soften. I hadn't participated in any professional development of the "spiritual nature" in a very long time. At the meeting, I won a drawing for a classroom library. I took it as a good omen that the classroom was where I was supposed to be.

As the students entered the room the day the boxes arrived, there was great interest in them. A conversation about how to organize the large collection: by author, genre, reading level, Dewey Decimal System concluded when the kids said, "Just put them out on the shelf!" A student who is not allowed to participate in weekly choir rehearsals because of poor scores on the state reading assessment asked me if she could "just read" during the rehearsal. I could barely put my name in each book without kids begging me to borrow them. Geronimo Stilton, Ramona Quimby, Judy Moody and Fudge had great power over my students. Then I thought, what if the \$2.3 billion dollar testing budget was used to buy books for every classroom in America? How was it possible that anyone concerned about the low literacy levels in this country did not think of purchasing *real books* – a gorgeous, eye-catching, heart thumping collection of inexpensive paperbacks for every classroom? And...in April, what do you think the reaction of those same students will be when the state test booklets arrive in the back of the classroom?